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ABSTRACT

This booklet provides a variety of ideas for preschool and kindergarten teachers and administrators interested in working cooperatively to establish linkages and ease the transition between educational settings for young children and their families. Benefits of facilitating transition for children, parents, and teachers and keys to successful transition are listed. Subsequent discussion concerns: (1) providing program continuity through developmentally appropriate curricula for preschool and kindergarten children; (2) maintaining communication between preschool and kindergarten staff; (3) preparing children for transition; and (4) involving parents in the transition. Differences and similarities between preschool and kindergarten children and programs are considered. (RH)

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Easing the Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten

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A Guide for Early Childhood Teachers and Administrators

PS 018397

Easing the Transition from Preschool to Kindergarten

A Guide for Early Childhood Teachers and Administrators

If you have ever made a move from one location to another or separated from friends, you know how hard a transition can be. Going from a known, comfortable environment to one that is different and unfamiliar can be very stressful. This is often how young children feel as they move from preschool to kindergarten.[1] The purpose of this booklet is to help educators ease this transition.

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Introduction

Increasing numbers of young children today are participating in early childhood programs prior to enrollment in kindergarten. For many young children, the kindergarten teacher is not the "first teacher" and the kindergarten class is not the first group experience.[2]

For young children, the transition from preschool to kindergarten may be met with a mixture of delight and concern. On the one hand, there is the pleasure of accomplishment as they move on to something new. On the other hand, there may be some anxiety over leaving friends and teachers that they know and love, for something less familiar.[3]

For parents, there is the pride that comes with seeing their child grow to meet new challenges, yet there is also a concern for how their child will cope with the change and what this situation may bring to their role as parents.

For the preschool teacher, the transition means saying good-by to children to whom they have grown attached, with the hope that what has been gained will provide a foundation for continued growth. For the kindergarten teacher, it means saying hello to a diverse group of children, with the hope that the new program will build upon earlier experiences.[4]

Because we know that learning is a continuous process, the transition from preschool to kindergarten is important for all those who educate and care for young children. Preschools and kindergartens are important influences in children's lives. Programs in prekindergarten classes, nursery schools, child care centers, Head Start, and family day care homes should be built on the growth taking place in the first years of the child's life. In turn, kindergarten programs should be built on the learning and development that have taken place in the home and through earlier educational experience.[5]

The influence of the family upon the child remains fundamental throughout these early years. It is important to link subsequent steps in the child's education to their earlier experiences and to involve the parents in these activities.[6]

This booklet provides a variety of ideas for preschool and kindergarten teachers and administrators, as they work cooperatively to establish linkages and ease the transition between educational settings for young children and their families. If you are an administrator in either setting, you play a crucial role in facilitating the implementation of these ideas with the teaching staff. Your leadership can make a significant difference in helping teachers find time to focus on the transition process. If you are a preschool or kindergarten teacher, you may want to share this booklet with your program director or principal in order to gain their support for these ideas.

Some programs may have already established procedures for transition. For such programs, these suggestions can serve to renew and expand current practices. In programs that have not yet addressed the issues of transition, one or more of the ideas presented can be adopted to meet particular needs. No matter where your program stands, the critical goal is to take a new step forward in promoting success for children and families as they move on to new early childhood experiences.

Benefits of Facilitating Transition

When early childhood educators take the time to help facilitate transition, there are benefits for children, parents, and teachers.

For Children

When preschool and kindergarten teachers help children move more easily into a new environment, the results for the children may include:

- continuity with earlier educational experiences;
- increased motivation and openness to new experiences;
- enhanced self-confidence;
- improved relations with other children and adults; and,
- a greater sense of trust between teachers and children.

For Parents

If parents are involved with teachers in providing a smooth transition for their children, the parents gain:

- increased confidence in their children's ability to achieve in the new setting;
- improved self-confidence in their own ability to communicate with educational staff and to effectively influence the educational system;
- a sense of pride and commitment in their ongoing involvement in the education of their children; and,
- a greater knowledge and appreciation of early childhood programs and staff.

For Teachers

Teachers who cooperate with others to ease the children's transition between educational programs can expect:

- increased knowledge of the children and an enhanced ability to meet individual needs;
- increased parental and community support;
- more resources and a larger network of professional support;
- increased awareness of the preschool or kindergarten programs in the community; and,
- a renewed sense of professionalism and pride in their efforts to reach out to young children and their families.

Keys to Successful Transition

There are four critical elements or keys to the successful transition of young children and families as they move from preschool to kindergarten. Educational staff in both settings can facilitate transition by:

- **providing program continuity through developmentally appropriate curricula for preschool and kindergarten children;**
- **maintaining ongoing communication and cooperation between preschool and kindergarten staff;**
- **preparing children for the transition; and,**
- **involving parents in the transition.**

By focusing attention on each one of these important aspects of the transition process, early childhood educators build a more continuous educational experience for young children and their families.

Providing Program Continuity Through Developmentally Appropriate Curricula for Preschool and Kindergarten Children

The move from preschool to kindergarten is made easier if each program is focused on the individual developmental needs of the children. Preschool and kindergarten may be operating in different types of settings with children who are different ages. However, the commonalities between the way four- and five-year-old children learn and the range of developmental levels represented in each program call for similar learning environments and teaching strategies. As discussed below, the transition between programs is facilitated by the degree to which each program is developmentally appropriate.

How does providing a developmentally appropriate curriculum in both preschool and kindergarten facilitate the transition between programs?

Developmentally appropriate programs provide for a wider range of developmental interests and abilities than the chronological age range of the group suggests. Since each child is a unique person with an individual personality, learning style, and family background, both preschool and kindergarten teachers need to be responsive to these individual differences.[8]

Moving to kindergarten will usually mean that a child will enter a new setting. However, if both programs are developmentally appropriate, children will be more likely to find similar activities which will allow them to begin their kindergarten experiences confident that they have the ability to accomplish certain tasks. Knowing what is expected adds to the children's self-confidence, encourages their attempts to try new activities, and facilitates continuity in their development.

What do preschool and kindergarten children have in common?

Both preschool and kindergarten children learn best by:[9]

- actively exploring their environment;
- interacting with adults and other children;
- using concrete materials and participating in activities that are relevant to their own experiences and culture; and,
- building upon their natural curiosity and desire to make sense of the world around them.

Both preschool and kindergarten children are continuously learning to:[10]

- use their bodies and express themselves through physical activities;
- solve problems and experiment with change;
- develop an understanding and acceptance of themselves as individuals;
- gain more self control and build cooperative relations with others; and
- communicate their thoughts and feelings as effectively and creatively as possible.

What is the significance of these common characteristics for planning developmentally appropriate curricula for preschool and kindergarten?

Preschool and kindergarten children have similar learning styles. Furthermore, each program has children with a wide range of developmental levels. For these reasons both preschool and kindergarten teachers may establish similar environments and approaches to facilitating growth and development. For example, preschool and kindergarten teachers can adopt the following developmentally appropriate practices:[11]

- designing experiences to stimulate learning in all areas — physical, social, emotional, and intellectual;
- planning curriculum and adult interactions which are responsive to individual differences in ability, interests, cultural backgrounds, and linguistic styles;
- providing an environment in which children can learn through active exploration and interaction with concrete materials, adults, and other children;
- organizing that environment so that children select many of their own activities among a variety of learning areas including: dramatic play, blocks, science, math, games and puzzles, books, recordings, art, and music;
- organizing the day so that children work individually or in small informal groups most of the time;
- providing many opportunities for children to see how spoken and written language are related;
- providing daily opportunities for children to use small and large muscles, to listen to stories, and to express themselves creatively;
- facilitating the development of self-control in children by using positive guidance techniques such as modeling and encouraging expected behavior, setting clear limits, and redirecting children to a more acceptable activity; and,
- providing many opportunities for children to develop social skills such as cooperating, helping, sharing, negotiating, and talking with others to solve interpersonal problems.

In what ways are preschool and kindergarten children different?

Although both preschool and kindergarten programs may have children at various developmental levels, most kindergarten children are one year older. Because this extra year has brought new experiences and natural growth, kindergarten children:[12]

- are more able to expand beyond their immediate experiences of self, home, and family and to develop interests in the community and world outside;
- show increased ability to use motor skills, to pay attention for longer periods of time, and to play and plan cooperatively; and,
- display a growing interest in symbols including written language and a written number system.

What is the significance of these differences in planning developmentally appropriate curriculum?

Although the preschool and kindergarten room may look similar, the kindergarten teacher is able to:[13]

- provide more elaboration in the children's interaction with materials and activities;
- encourage more joint planning and cooperation among children;
- provide an environment which puts more emphasis on stimulating written language and literacy skills which are appropriate to the individual child's developmental level and ability; and,
- focus on the development of more independent work habits and enhanced ability to follow teacher directions.

What other differences exist between preschool and kindergarten programs?

The settings of preschools and kindergartens are often different. For example:[14]

- Group size in preschool may be relatively small — 15-20 in center-based programs, with 2-3 teaching staff, or even smaller in home-based programs. In kindergarten, there may be 25 (or more) children, with 1-2 teaching staff.
- Preschool schedules may be flexible, whereas kindergartens may be required to adhere to a time schedule based in part on cooperative uses of playgrounds, cafeterias, gyms, or buses.
- Preschools may be smaller and more community based, whereas kindergartens are usually part of a larger institution with older children and different educational expectations.
- Preschools may be privately administered or cooperatively administered by parents, while kindergartens are usually part of a school system most often administered by a local board of education.

Although each program can provide a developmentally appropriate curriculum, the setting may effect the way each program is carried out.

Maintaining Ongoing Communication Between Preschool and Kindergarten Staff

Administrators in both preschool and kindergartens can set the stage for successful transition activities by supporting the ongoing communication and cooperation among early childhood teachers. Preschool and kindergarten staff can increase educational program continuity by getting to know each other, sharing information about their programs, and planning an effective transition system. Opportunities for communication and cooperation should occur throughout the program year. Communication can be enhanced when those involved are familiar and comfortable with each other. If opportunities are pro-

vided for participants to ask questions and provide information about themselves and their programs in an open atmosphere, the foundation is laid for effective cooperation during the transition.[15]

One of the simplest yet most important needs is for accurate and unbiased information about programs. Most teachers of preschool children are understandably proud of their programs and they have a professional and personal interest in the young children enrolled. It may be difficult to "let them go" to what may seem like a more impersonal institutional setting. On the other hand, most kindergarten teachers, equally proud and dedicated, strive to plan and carry out an educational program based on community expectations, school goals and objectives, and the children's individual needs. Although preschool and kindergarten teachers may have had different career paths, honest acceptance of each other's professionalism and commitment is essential to the transition process.[16]

Most preschool and kindergarten teachers have limited time outside of the classroom. However, opportunities for formal and informal contact should be provided throughout the year. Since preschool teachers may have to interact with several "receiver" schools and kindergarten teachers may have to contact several "feeder" programs, it may be helpful to establish a community-wide transition committee in order to involve all the relevant programs in planning transition activities.

The following tips include suggestions that may help early childhood educators begin the exchange between programs in a way that builds mutual respect and understanding.

Tips for Ongoing Communication Between Preschool and Kindergarten Staff[7]

- Preschool and kindergarten administrators can initate opportunities for communication and exchange among teachers in order to begin planning for the transition.
- Administrators and teachers can plan an informal visit to meet the staff of the preschool or kindergarten program. During this visit, staff can begin to get to know each other, share information about the program, and discuss the need for specific transition activities and other collaborative efforts.
- In communities with a number of preschools and kindergartens, a community-wide transition committee can be organized with representatives from preschools, public schools, parents, and other community organizations. Both preschool and public school administrators can be instrumental in establishing the committee. Such committees can be responsible for developing a step-by-step plan and corresponding materials to be used in the transition process by all programs.

- Through informal contact, or through the transition committee, activities can be planned including joint kindergarten registration, workshops and materials for parents, and other activities that will facilitate the transition process.
- An open house can be held for kindergarten or preschool staff to explain the program and get acquainted. Slides of children can be used to illustrate the daily program. Written material about the program can be provided.
- Teachers can visit each other's classrooms during the school year to observe. Some programs may be able to exchange staff as substitutes on occasion.
- Participation on policy advisory committees can be combined where possible. For example, you might ask the kindergarten teacher to sit on the preschool board or invite a preschool teacher to join in meetings of the school PTA.
- Exchange days can be planned between preschool and kindergarten staff.

- Joint inservice workshops can be developed which focus on transition as well as other issues facing early childhood educators.
- Preschool administrators can write letters to receiving public schools in the spring listing the names of incoming children and communicating information about their preschool program.
- Kindergarten registration can be planned in conjunction with preschool programs.
- If kindergarten children are screened prior to entrance, the screening can be planned in conjunction with the preschool. Preschool staff, who are familiar with the children, can be present during the screening. In this way, they may be able to reassure an anxious child and increase the effectiveness of the procedure. Preschools can also offer to "host" the screening, so that children remain in a familiar environment during this process.
- Health and social service staff can meet to discuss continuity of services for children and families.
- Arrangements can be made between preschool and kindergarten staff to provide special information and assistance for non-English speaking parents as their children move on to a new program.
- Preschool staff can discuss the transfer of specific records to the school. The type of records available will vary. Some programs, such as Head Start or programs serving special needs children, may already have specific arrangements for the transfer or records. The most important concern in this area is to provide parents with their full rights to privacy regarding the records of their children.
- Once children move on to kindergarten, follow-up discussions can be held in the fall to answer questions and discuss the progress of children.

Preparing Children for Transition

Never before has early education reached as many children as it does today. Children entering kindergarten may have attended full day or half day child care for one or more years. This group experience may have followed years of home based care with a parent, relative, or other caregiver. Because of the variety of programs available, children can enter kindergarten with vastly different experiences. In turn, kindergarten programs are diverse in purpose, structure, and schedule.[18]

Despite the variety of previous experiences, all children need to be accepted at their own developmental level. Preparing children for the transition to kindergarten does not mean "getting them ready" by focusing on a narrow range of academic skills, drilling on new rules, or retaining them in preschool for another year. School is a place where children and parents expect to find opportunities for growth and development from whatever starting point the child brings to the new setting.[19]

Children need to know what is expected of them by adults in the new program and to have several opportunities to become familiar with the new environment. They should look forward to the new experience with a sense of excitement and anticipation rather than feeling threatened and fearful of what lies ahead. Transition activities for young children should be like those which prepare them for anything new and can include discussions, stories, games, dramatic play, and field trips.

The following tips include suggestions for preschool and kindergarten teachers and administrators to help plan and implement transition activities for children.

Tips for Preschool Staff in Planning Transition Activities for Children[20]

- Schedule a visit or a series of visits to the new school for the children. These visits can include a tour of the building and playground, eating lunch in the cafeteria, and/or participating in activities in the kindergarten classroom. Take pictures or videos of these activities to share with children and parents.
- Help the children feel comfortable and confident about the move to kindergarten by discussing the new activities, schedules, and bus routes.
- Read books to the children that discuss changes and moves. Create a puppet show or scrapbook with pictures of the new school. Allow children to express their feelings about the new school through dramatic play activities and by dictating stories. Encourage children to ask questions.
- If the kindergarten program has different rules (such as lining up to go on the bus), the preschool teacher may want to play games with the children to familiarize them with the new procedures. However, avoid drilling them or creating anxiety about the new environment.

- Invite a kindergarten child or older sibling to visit the preschool and talk about his/her school.
- Make a calendar to highlight important events such as visits to the school, good-by party, first day of school, etc.

Tips for Kindergarten Staff in Planning Transition Activities for Children

- Invite parents to visit the school with their child during the school year before the child begins kindergarten.
- Hold a back-to-school night in August so that parents and children can visit the classroom, take part in sample activities, and meet other children and parents in the new group.
- Send a personal "letter from your teacher" or postcard to all new students in the late summer, welcoming them to the kindergarten class. The school PTA might be contacted to provide resources for materials and postage.
- Plan to phase in groups of children during the first week of school in order to provide more individual attention to each child. The teacher may want to have children come with their parents for an hour the first day, in three different groups, or spend two to three days orienting five to ten children a day. Focusing on small groups of children during this initial period can promote a smoother transition for each child.

Involving Parents in the Transition

A joint effort by school and home is needed to affect a smooth transition. This means that continuity is important for the parents as well as the children. For the parent, the preschool may be a familiar family support system where there has been frequent contact with the teaching staff. The kindergarten may represent a less familiar environment with a different type of program for children and families.

Many parents are actively involved in their children's preschool program. Studies indicate that such involvement contributes to the success of the educational program. Parents need encouragement

to continue to be involved in the educational program and to help their children feel competent as they move on to kindergarten. Parents can promote confidence in their children by conveying a positive attitude about the new school.

Parents also need support to work through the effect of changing programs on their daily lives. For example, locating child care that can be used in conjunction with the kindergarten may be a critical need for some families.

As parents become more familiar with the new setting and meet other parents in their children's peer group, they gain confidence in their own power to have an effect on the education of their children.

The following tips include suggestions for preschool and kindergarten teachers and administrators in planning and implementing transition activities with parents.

Tips for Preschool Staff to Involve Parents in the Transition[21]

- Provide parents with information about the school their child may be attending including: address, name of principal, telephone number, and dates for registration.
- Encourage parents to attend kindergarten "round-up" or other orientation sessions that the school may plan for incoming parents.
- Discuss child care options with working parents. Provide information and referral to appropriate after school programs.
- Invite school personnel, including teachers and principals, to attend a parent meeting and discuss the kindergarten program, the role of parents in the school, and to answer any other questions regarding the school program.
- Discuss the transfer of records with parents and provide release of information forms to be signed by the parents. Such forms should include details on "who" is releasing "what" information "to whom" and for "what purpose."
- Help arrange a visit for the parent and child to the new school.
- Create a story about the new school for parents to read to their children. Encourage parents to build their child's confidence about going to school.
- Introduce parents to other parents of children who will attend the new program. Encourage meetings of new classmates prior to school opening.
- Discuss changes in services for parents that may not be available in the public school. For example, some preschools, especially Head Start programs, may help parents with health appointments and transportation. This type of service may not be available in the new program.

Tips for Kindergarten Staff to Involve Parents in the Transition[22]

- In the spring, invite new parents to a general orientation about the new school and the opportunities for parent participation.
- Encourage parents to volunteer in the kindergarten classroom prior to September.
- Provide a parent orientation package including: the child's new schedule, transportation procedures, required school forms, food service, and other program information.
- Send notes to parents prior to school opening which encourage parent involvement and offer suggestions for helping children feel at home more quickly during the first few days of school. The letter may include tips on what parents might say to their children to ease anxiety about the first day, a description of the activities planned during the initial weeks, suggestions for comfortable apparel, and bus schedules.
- Introduce new parents to parents of children already in kindergarten. The PTA may be helpful in establishing such a "buddy system" between "old" and "new" parents.

Summary

Planning for the transition of children as they move from preschool to kindergarten provides continuity in their early educational experiences. The transition is made easier when both programs are developmentally appropriate and respond to the individual needs of each child.

Ongoing communication and cooperation between preschool and kindergarten staff leads to a greater understanding of each other's program and an increased ability to plan together for the transition.

When children are prepared for making the transition to a new program, they gain self confidence and are more likely to succeed. When parents are included in the transition process, it renews their sense of involvement in their child's education.

As preschool and kindergarten teachers and administrators plan and implement the ideas presented in this booklet, they will be helping to provide a more coordinated educational experience for young children and their families.

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